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**CHURCH GROWTH BY ANOTHER NAME: CHALLENGES AND
OPPORTUNITIES FOR THE FUTURE OF A MOVEMENT**

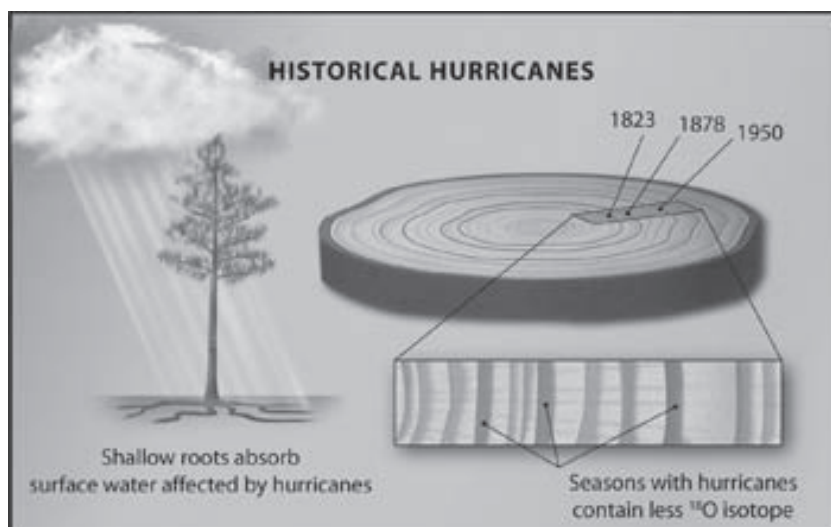
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abstract

A brief review of the church growth movement not only highlights significant accomplishments but also raises questions about its future. While church growth thinkers were compelled by the evangelistic mandate this article argues that continued obedience to the Great Commission will require new responses to the rapidly changing context of ministry. Charting the path ahead, the author identifies six key challenges that demand new initiatives from the church: 1) the challenge to reinvent the evangelistic paradigm and imagination; 2) the challenge of diasporas, and the worldwide migration of people; 3) the challenge of urbanization, 4) the challenge of the plateaued church, 5) the challenge of post-modernism, and 6) the challenge of extending the church where there is no church. These challenges raise new questions and serve as opportunities for reaching receptive people.

Several years ago when I was doing the field research for my Ph.D. dissertation I had the opportunity to conduct case studies on churches throughout the U.S. that had implemented a series of church growth strategies over the span of several years. By interviewing long-term leaders and looking at printed materials from



10 Figure 1. (Used by permission, National Science Foundation, Zina Deretsky)

days gone by, a picture emerged of what strategies each church had adopted, how long each strategy was utilized, and what results were left behind.

Botanists do something similar when they study trees. Using the science of dendrochronology, they can study fallen trees by looking at their tree rings or living trees using core samples to determine much about the history and health of that tree. By looking at the tree rings they can determine approximately when that region was affected by drought, volcanic eruption, insect infestations, fire, and so on. They can also examine the health of living trees and even make projections about their future.

Looking back over the history of church interventions is much the same as looking at tree rings. My dissertation research revealed that some churches had utilized a series of diverse evangelism strategies over the years, ranging from Evangelism Explosion, Friend Days, Dinners for Eight, the Alpha Course, the Meta-church model, Refocusing Networks, Natural Church Development assessments, etc. Some of these strategies required significant financial investment in training, consulting, and resources; some did not. Some persisted as the dominant outreach paradigm for years, while others represented experiments that did not endure. The results of each varied as much as the strategies did. Yet all tended to focus attention on the goal of evangelism and called on the church to cast their eyes toward the harvest.

If one were to zoom out from looking at the intervention history of a local church or group of churches and examined in macro perspective the “evangelism

history” of the evangelical church in the twentieth century other patterns emerge. Perhaps the leading approach in the last fifty years was the Church Growth movement. When viewed in historical perspective, the Church Growth movement reveals a similar variance of goals, strategies, and results that could be observed at a local church level. Diverse strategies and models were employed yet all were done for a common purpose, to fulfill the Great Commission.

Having served for the last ten years on the leadership team for the American Society for Church Growth and now as the General Editor of this new journal I have had the opportunity to observe the progress of the movement and also to look ahead to the future. What follows is an attempt to conduct a “tree ring study” by first briefly reviewing its history, the critical markers in the growth of the movement itself and then in the second section, in the heart of the article, to outline six new challenges for the future. The next several issues of this journal will then address these themes one by one, exploring the nature of each “problem” and what might be done by the church in response with the goal of completing the Great Commission.

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historical backdrop

Though pioneers such as J. Wascom Pickett preceded Donald McGavran with a rallying cry for responsible evangelism, it was McGavran who notably called the church to a new accountability for reaching lost men and women with the Gospel. Bucking the trends sweeping the Protestant church toward a social gospel in the first half of the twentieth century, McGavran challenged the church to measure its results not vaguely on the basis of good intentions and charitable actions alone but also on the incorporating of new followers of Jesus into the fellowship of the church. In doing so, McGavran affected a paradigm shift among evangelical churches especially that led to the ground swell called the Church Growth movement.

With the publication of *Bridges of God* in 1955, *Understanding Church Growth* in 1970, and the establishment of the School of World Mission and the Institute of Church Growth at Fuller Theological Seminary in 1965, McGavran’s ideas catalyzed the evangelical world into action. Moving into center stage at the Lausanne Conference in 1974, the Church Growth movement rapidly gained strength and momentum. Win Arn and Peter Wagner introduced these insights first gleaned out of missionary efforts in the global south into North America, essentially creating a North American missiology for use in local Western churches. Denominational leaders, mission executives, and entrepreneurial pastors from

across the U.S. flocked to the conferences, seminars, and seminary classes in order to learn how to use these principles in reaching the lost in their communities at home and abroad.

By most accounts the Church Growth movement peaked sometime in the mid-eighties to early nineties, driven forward by the publishing and advocacy power of several church growth organizations. For example, The Institute for American Church Growth was founded by Win Arn (1973), the Charles E. Fuller Institute of Evangelism and Church Growth (CEFI) prospered under the leadership of Carl George, and the Institute of Church Growth mushroomed under the direction of Elmer Towns. These agencies among others served to widely disseminate church growth thinking and resources by generating books, workbooks, tapes, videos, seminars, conferences, and church consultations. Seminaries added the church growth emphasis to their curriculums, and denominational officials propagated it among their membership.

12 But in time the heyday for church growth passed. Pastors who tried to implement step-by-step instructions for growing their church were often disappointed with the results. The criticism that church growth received in its early days that accused it of being “only about numbers” began to stick, as unfair as that might have been. Interest lagged, and attention turned elsewhere.

In its place “church health” rose as an alternative term to church growth. Christian Schwarz’s 1996 book *Natural Church Development* (NCD) with its accompanying assessment tool for measuring the eight essential elements of church health became the new center point of this movement. Other books on church health emerged, the new term became widely adopted, and the tide turned. The term “church growth” increasingly acquired negative connotations as being out of date, numbers-driven, mega-church oriented, and even carnal, mechanistic, or myopic. The term church health, of course, had its own limitations as some pastors would judge their non-growing churches as healthy, even normative, despite the intentions of NCD advocates. Church health had shed some of the negative features of church growth but in the process had acquired new liabilities. This is the problem of any solution: In time it generates its own set of problems for the next generation to solve.

fad, fashion, or basic product?

Looking back into the “tree rings” of evangelical outreach strategies one is forced to ask questions about the enduring significance of the Church Growth or church health movements. Were these mere “fads” defined as “a practice or interest

followed for a time with exaggerated zeal?”¹ Or are they fashions (some call them trends) popularized in the mainstream church, fashions which are characterized by longer time spans, momentum, scope, and durability?

An examination of the Church Growth movement based on the above criteria reveals that it was certainly more than a fad. With a history of expansion covering at least fifteen years (1970–1985), the rapid rate of distribution, the scope of its impact (reverberating in most evangelical denominations in the U.S. and abroad²), and its persistence until today, the movement made its mark. Church health, likewise, has been the dominant paradigm in the literature for the last fifteen years and has been implemented on a global scale.

Much research has been done into how ideas spread through a population group. Everett Roger’s masterful work regarding the diffusion of innovations appeared as early as 1962, but just over twenty years later there were over three thousand diffusion publications available.³ Malcom Gladwell’s more recent book, *The Tipping Point* (2000), represented a popularized study on social epidemics that showed how new ideas can become “viral,” quickly spreading through a culture or region. Relating these insights to the fashion industry, Figure 2 shows the differences between fads, fashions, and basic products with their relative rates of adoption, persistence, and discontinuance.

Examining the Church Growth movement in light of communication research, one is led to ask the question of whether church growth was simply the “fashion” of a certain time period or whether there is something about it that is more enduring, more fundamental, and more critical to the nature of the church and the

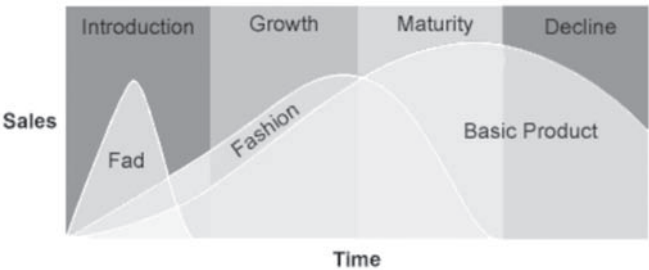


Figure 2. Lifecycle for Basic and Fashion Products⁴

¹ Merriam-Webster.com. <http://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/fad> (accessed 20 August, 2009).

² A single institution, the Institute for American Church Growth, was said to have reached nearly thirty thousand key lay leaders and four thousand local congregations alone with church growth teaching. Elmer L. Towns, *A Practical Encyclopedia of Evangelism and Church Growth* (Ventura, CA: Regal Books, 1995), 77.

³ Everett Rogers, *Diffusion of Innovations*, third ed. (New York: The Free Press, 1983), xv.

⁴ Cornell University, *The Cutting Edge Apparel Business Guide*, available from <http://instruct1.cit.cornell.edu/courses/cuttingedge/lifeCycle/03.html> (accessed 20 August, 2009).

task of the Great Commission? In other words, was there something to it to be preserved and cultivated, something that must not be lost, something vital to the church?

Historically, the Church Growth movement emerged as a response to a church that had drifted in its mission and focus. It addressed a growing trend in which mission agencies expended enormous amounts of time and effort in humanitarian and educational efforts with little attention as to whether people were coming to Christ and being incorporated into a church. While McGavran felt that humanitarian and educational efforts were a necessary and vital expression of the church not to be divorced from a proclamation of the Good News, his message centered on the urgency and centrality of evangelism.

Today, the foundational motivations and purposes of the Church Growth movement are just as relevant and necessary to the church as they were several decades ago. The prophetic call to re-examine our practices and to rise to new accountability is just as important. However, a rapidly changing context requires that reassessment and adjustment occur regularly. With a view to its past, a discerning eye on the present, and a prophetic perspective on the future, it is critical to ask what new challenges are facing the movement today? Are the previous instincts at the core of the movement still adequate? Do church growth principles need modification? What new issues need to be addressed? What are the theological, methodological, and strategic issues that need to be explored?

In the rest of this article, I wish to outline six new challenges facing the Church Growth movement that demand a reasoned response and a redoubling of effort. These challenges may be difficult to overcome, but reframed they represent grand opportunities for the church, reflecting God's sovereign movement through history and across the nations.

the challenge of reinvention

Carl George, a church growth pioneer, reflecting on the Church Growth and church health movements, has suggested that we need a new term, a new model, or a new emphasis about every ten to fifteen years in order to sustain the attention of the church on reaching the lost. Evangelism strategies come and go. Labels change. Emphases shift. Yet this key task of reaching the lost must remain a high priority.

The last several decades have seen a variety of movements that have served to unite multiple denominations and mission agencies together toward this task of global evangelism. The DAWN Movement (Disciple A Whole Nation) swept through the Philippines in mid-eighties and early nineties with the goal of planting

a church in every community of two thousand people.⁵ The “A.D. 2000 Movement” sought to complete the task of reaching the remaining “unreached people groups” with the Gospel by the year 2000 (it was later renamed the “A.D. 2000 Movement and Beyond” to reflect the fact that this goal was not yet accomplished). The “10/40 Window” was a term coined by Luis Bush⁶ to help focus missions efforts on the least evangelized countries between the latitudes of 10 and 40 degrees north of the equator and stretching from West Africa to the edges of southeast Asia, the region that represents the birth place of most of the world’s major religions. Many other examples could follow. All of these movements and developments can trace some aspects of their spiritual lineage to the Church Growth movement.

Despite this rich history, in recent years the relative decline in the popularity of the term itself might lead one to conclude that church growth was a fashion or trend that has run its course. It served a noble purpose. It accomplished significant goals, but now its day is gone. Certainly, over the years, church growth has acquired negative connotations in the minds of many that are now unhelpful for its purposes. This fact has led some to abandon the movement, its principles, and strategies.

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Others call for the movement to reinvent itself thus preserving its founding instincts and multi-disciplinary, missiological perspectives. Clearly, seeking to rewind the clock should not be done for nostalgic reasons or to engage in “empire-building” for purposes of making pastors more personally successful. Instead, the voices calling for reinvention recognize core theological truths that received emphasis in the Church Growth movement are foundational to our understanding of the missionary God who crossed barriers to bring men and women to himself. These voices stand against the missional, institutional, and theological drift that history demonstrates distracts the church away from effective evangelism.⁷

After wrestling with this painful realization over the last several years, the American Society for Church Growth took the bold step to rebrand itself “The Great Commission Research Network.” In like manner this journal is renamed beginning with this issue to be the *Great Commission Research Journal*. These efforts are designed to help return the focus to the core mission for which they were

⁵ Their current goal is to mobilize twenty thousand apostolic leaders to commission two million church planters, to plant twenty million churches by the year 2020. (DAWN Ministries, available from <http://www.dawnministries.org/about-dawn/our-vision-and-strategy> (accessed 20 August, 2009).

⁶ Michael Pocock, Gailyn van Rheenen, and Douglas McConnell, *The Changing Face of World Missions*, (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2005), 185.

⁷ McGavran’s original term was “effective evangelism” before the term “church growth” was adopted.

established. Both the journal and the network have the goal of disseminating recent thinking and research on how to best win men and women to Christ and incorporate them into an active fellowship of believers.

The reinvention of church growth, however, must go beyond a name change or a re-branding of its identity. It must return to its missiological roots, resist step-by-step formulaic solutions, engage meaningfully with new voices and speak to the challenges of a changing context. With that in mind five other challenges will be identified here with some indication as to the opportunities they provide.

the challenge of diasporas

If you have lived in the U.S. for the last several years, you will recognize that your community has changed. Our communities are nothing like the homogeneous neighborhoods portrayed on the TV shows from the sixties and seventies. Massive migrations are rapidly changing the demographic landscape in the U.S. and the ministry context of most churches.

The U.N.'s population division reports that there are two hundred million international migrants on the move worldwide, a number equal to the population of the world's fifth most populated country, Brazil. It is more than double the number of international migrants recorded twenty-five years ago in 1980.⁸ By the year 2010 the estimated number of international migrants will be almost 214 million.⁹

With thirty-eight million migrants, the United States hosted the largest number of migrants in 2005 (20% of the worldwide total), followed by Russia with twelve million, Germany with ten million.¹⁰ From 1995 to 2000 immigration accounted for 75% of the population growth in the U.S.¹¹

One of the primary reasons for migration is globalization, as new technologies fuel the rapid transfer of capital, goods, services, and information. With the expansion of the global economy many people are experiencing a better life, and yet the distribution of opportunity is uneven. Huge disparities are found worldwide in the standard of living and human security. For example, 45.7% of

⁸ Report of the Global Commission on International Migration, *Migration in an Interconnected World: New Directions for Action* (Switzerland: SRO-Kundig, 2005), 10. Copies available from: www.gcim.org.

⁹ United Nations, Department of Economic and Social Affairs, Population Division, Migrant Section available from <http://esa.un.org/migration/p2k0data.asp> (accessed 20 August, 2009).

¹⁰ United Nations, Department of Economic and Social Affairs, *International Migration Report 2006: A Global Assessment*, 17.

¹¹ Report of the Global Commission on International Migration, *Migration in an Interconnected World: New Directions for Action* (Switzerland: SRO-Kundig, 2005), 85. Copies available from: www.gcim.org.

people earn less than one dollar a day in Sub-Saharan Africa¹² while the richest 1% of the world's population earns more than the poorest 57% combined.¹³ Add to this remarkably different rates of unemployment, life expectancy, educational attainment, and birth rates between the developed and developing worlds, and the pressure to migrate becomes intense.

The resulting changes to the ministry contexts in the U.S. and around the world certainly affects the evangelism effectiveness of long-standing, homogeneous churches who find it difficult to adapt. Without relearning new ways to carry out ministry in an increasingly pluralistic, multi-ethnic world many churches will become insular, with shrinking congregations and community impact.

On the other hand, the new immigrant populations represent a whole new opportunity for evangelism and church planting. Long ago realized by church growth missiologists, geographically-displaced peoples experience a much higher level of receptivity to new ideas, beliefs, and lifestyles. Chris Clayman, a Southern Baptist missionary working in New York City, confirms that West African Muslims who are resistant to the Gospel in Africa, become far more receptive upon their arrival in New York. Attentive ministry leaders will see in these patterns brand new opportunities to reach a much more diverse population with the Gospel than they ever had before.

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However, the potential for catalyzing church planting movements is much larger than local churches can anticipate. One of the key features of migrant populations is the connections they maintain with their homeland. In our own research of undocumented Mexican immigrants in U.S. urban contexts, we found that migration is not a one-time event for most. Instead many undocumented workers illegally transversed the border a number of times to visit family members, celebrate special events, and to carry home gifts and money. Whether in person or through phone and e-mail communications, many migrants often have a heightened status back home as they share about their new life and experiences and display the wealth gained in their travels.¹⁴

If this rising influence can be illustrated financially, in 2004 migrants sent one hundred fifty billion dollars in formal remittances to their homelands, while another three hundred billion dollars is estimated to have been transferred

¹² Report of the Global Commission on International Migration, *Migration in an Interconnected World: New Directions for Action* (Switzerland: SRO-Kundig, 2005), 84. Copies available from: www.gcim.org.

¹³ B. Milanovic, *True World Income Distribution, 1988 and 1993: First Calculation Based on Household Surveys Alone* (World Bank, 1999).

¹⁴ The "trans-national identity" of migrants is a topic of great interest in the field of anthropology as this phenomenon has significant implications for both cultures involved in the exchange. As an example see Laura Velasco Ortiz' work, *Mixtec Transnational Identity*, (Tucson, AZ: University of Arizona Press, 2005).

informally.¹⁵ In developing countries this exchange of wealth was the second largest source of external funding after foreign direct investment. At this rate the primary means of alleviating poverty worldwide is the sending of funds to the homeland by migrants far outstripping that contributed by government and development agencies. By comparison World Vision, the world's largest Christian development organization, spent only seven hundred million dollars on worldwide projects in 2004.¹⁶

As one looks back in history, even as far back as biblical times, it is easy to conclude that perhaps the single greatest mechanism for worldwide evangelization has been the diasporas and migrations of the peoples of the earth. Far more than the planned and calculated strategies of church and missions agencies migrations generated by force or choice place people of faith in proximity with people who need Christ.

To maximize the potential of this great harvest, good research needs to be conducted to identify the nations among us. Chris Clayman has led one such effort in New York City to map the people groups of that sprawling urban complex and find entry points for the Gospel. Here at Biola University we have recently initiated a project with similar goals in Southern California. From this, it is hoped, will emerge new strategies for growing the church in the U.S. and abroad.

the challenge of urbanization

Related to the previous challenge and one that is equally strategic to address is the worldwide trend toward urbanization. The urban phenomenon has its roots in antiquity, but in our modern time it is reaching a scale unimaginable in the past.

The first reference to the city was when Cain, in his anger toward God, established a city and named it after his son in defiance of God's judgment that he wander the earth (Gen. 4:17). Since that point and through time the locations of the world's greatest urban centers have changed, and the rate of urbanization has skyrocketed. Experts believe that in 100 A.D. the largest cities in the world were under five hundred thousand people and were widely scattered among several empires.¹⁷

¹⁵ Report of the Global Commission on International Migration, *Migration in an Interconnected World: New Directions for Action* (Switzerland: SRO-Kundig, 2005), 85. Copies available from: www.gcim.org.

¹⁶ Christian Science Monitor on November 21, 2005 available at <http://www.csmonitor.com/2005/1121/csmimg/p17a.pdf> (accessed on 25 August, 2009).

¹⁷ Largest was Rome: 450,000 followed by: Luoyang (Hanan), China: 420,000; Seleucia, Iraq: 250,000; Alexandria, Egypt: 250,000; Antioch, Turkey: 150,000; Anuradhapura, Sri Lanka: 130,000; Peshawar, Pakistan: 120,000; Carthage, Tunisia: 100,000; Suzhou, China: n/a; Smyrna, Turkey: 90,000. Data from: Tertius Chandler, *Four Thousand Years of Urban Growth: An Historical Census*, revised ed., (Lewiston, NY: St. David's University Press, 1987).

By 1900 all but one of the world's largest cities were concentrated in Europe and the United States, a product of technology produced by the industrial revolution.¹⁸ In 1950 the list of the top ten largest cities was populated by Tokyo, Shanghai, Buenos Aires, and Kolkata, India.¹⁹ In 2007 only one city (New York) of the top ten list was in the West, and by the year 2050, according to a United Nations projection, only New York (#7), Los Angeles (#17), and Paris (#27), make it into the list of the twenty-seven largest cities.²⁰

Not only are cities getting bigger, but the total percentage of urbanites among the world's population is dramatically increasing. Sometime during the year 2008, according to the United Nations report, for the first time in history the world's population became more urban than not (more than 50%). By the year 2050 it is projected that nearly 70% of the world's population will live in cities. Two countries alone, China and India, will account for more than one-third of worldwide urban population growth between 2007 and 2050. In developed countries the percent of the population living in urban contexts will be especially dramatic. By 2050 the United States population will be over 90% urban followed by Europe at 84%.²¹

This challenge is made more acute given the white evangelical church's track record with urban ministries in the United States and its predisposition to flee. In the last 200 years (with emphasis on the last 50 years), the evangelical church has been more at home on the rural frontier or in the suburbs than in the sprawling metropolis.²² Evangelicals tended to view the city as evil, a place to be avoided, and through "white flight" abandoned the city in post-WWII America. In one of the more graphic criticisms, Jacques Ellul, a French philosopher, law professor, sociologist, and Christian theologian fashioned a theology against the city, where he characterized it as man's ultimate defiance against the Creator.²³ In a more muted but no less troubling exposition, Frank Tillapaugh spoke of the "farmers in the city church" arguing that evangelicals have inadvertently employed a rural theology and style of ministry in an increasingly urban world.²⁴ To this Ray Bakke,

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¹⁸ London: 6,480,000; New York 4,242,000; Paris: 3,330,000; Berlin 2,707,000; Chicago: 1,717,000; Vienna, Austria: 1,698,000; Tokyo: 1,497,000; St. Petersburg, Russia: 1,439,000; Manchester, U.K.: 1,435,000; Philadelphia: 1,418,000. Data from: Tertius Chandler, *Four Thousand Years of Urban Growth: An Historical Census*, revised ed. (Lewiston, NY: St. David's University Press, 1987).

¹⁹ Ibid.

²⁰ United Nations, *World Urbanization Prospects: 2007 Revision. Executive Summary*. (Department of Economic and Social Affairs, February 26, 2008), 10.

²¹ Population Division of the Department of Economic and Social Affairs of the United Nations Secretariat, *World Population Prospects: The 2006 Revision and World Urbanization Prospects: The 2007 Revision*, available at <http://esa.un.org/unup> (accessed on 30 August, 2009).

²² Particularly strong was church growth among Baptist "farmer-preachers" and Methodist "circuit riders" on the frontier in contrast to established denominations with a pre-revolutionary war orientation toward Europe. From: Frank R. Tillapaugh, *Unleashing the Church* (Ventura, CA: Regal Books, 1982), 29.

²³ Jacques Ellul, *The Meaning of the City* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1970).

²⁴ Frank R. Tillapaugh, *Unleashing the Church* (Ventura, CA: Regal Books, 1982), 26–43.

Harvie Conn, Roger Greenway, and Timothy Monsma add their voices lamenting the evangelical unpreparedness and reluctance to engage the urban world.²⁵

Yet cities with their communication and transportation hubs have extraordinary power to transmit new ideas, styles, and practices to vast regions of the world. And when one considers that cities are populated by receptive peoples, it becomes clear that cities are strategic centers to engage in church growth to impact the world. One of the great challenges for the church is to explore new ways to raise up new disciples and communities of faith in the city that will influence regions and whole nations for the Gospel.

Finally, cities serve as incubators of new forms, redefining previous patterns. For example, in addition to giving energy to mono-cultural, non-Caucasian church growth, cities are birthing rooms of multi-cultural churches and church networks as well as new immigrant churches. These emerging models are springing up to engage the multiplicity of peoples on the urban landscape. As such they represent a challenge for the next generation of church growth scholarship and praxis.

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the challenge of the plateaued church

Given the total amount of capital investment represented by the established Protestant church in the United States and their theoretical combined potential to be applied to the completion of the Great Commission, it is perhaps safe to argue that there are few challenges more strategic than reinjecting growth and health into plateaued or declining churches. In spite of this fact, enormous resources remain locked up in ineffective churches often more concerned with self-preservation than outreach.

In a study of seventy thousand Protestant churches between the years of 1999 and 2005, The American Church Research Project discovered that 52% of the churches studied were declining, losing more than 10% of their attendance over a six-year period.²⁶ Stable churches that neither grew nor declined at more than 10% over the same period accounted for 17% of the total number of churches studied. Only 31% of the churches studied were growing at more than 10% in six years. Predictably, church growth through biological growth (children born into church-going families) and transfer growth from other less healthy churches account for

²⁵ Ray Bakke, *The Urban Christian: Effective Ministry in Today's World* (Downer's Grove: InterVarsity Press, 1987); Harvie M. Conn, *Planting and Growing Urban Churches: From Dream to Reality* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 1997), and Roger S. Greenway and Timothy M. Monsma, *Cities: Mission's New Frontier* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 2000).

²⁶ David T. Olson, *The American Church in Crisis*, (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishers, 2008), 131–132.

some significant percentage²⁷ of these growth rates. Previous studies by other researchers have traditionally revealed a low conversion growth rate among those churches that were growing. In the American Research Project Study the churches that were growing seemed to be the result of higher birthrates (than churches that were losing members), high transfer growth from mainline or Roman Catholic churches to Evangelical churches, and the fact that many were located in areas experiencing a higher than average population growth.²⁸

The fact of the matter is that the growth of the American church is not even keeping pace with population growth. In 1990, fifty-two million people attended church each week. In 2006, sixteen years later, this number had remained unchanged even while the population had increased.²⁹ In fact, in no single state in the U.S. has church attendance kept up with population growth.

Now after decades of teaching, assessment, and intervention strategies, the Church Growth and church health movements have yet to reverse the trends in American and European churches toward plateau and decline.³⁰ Aging churches (over forty years old) and middle-sized churches (between fifty and one thousand in attendance) are declining at a more rapid rate than the rest of the population.³¹ Intervention into these ailing churches combined with robust church planting movements will be needed to meet this challenge.

the challenge of post-modernism

A rising chorus of diverse voices that include social scientists, historians, theologians, and philosophers all speak with a single message: something significant has changed in the basic epistemological orientation of Western (and in some non-western) cultures. We are apparently living in what some call “the hinge of history” where fundamental beliefs and values are in flux. Stanley Grenz declares, “we are apparently experiencing a cultural shift that rivals the innovations that marked the birth of modernity out of the decay of the Middle Ages: we are in the midst of a transition from the modern to the postmodern era.”³²

Formed by the very forces of modernism, and yet positioned as a counterpoint to it, postmodernism questions the uncritically held assumptions of a society that

²⁷ See: William Chadwick, *Stealing Sheep: The Church's Hidden Problems with Transfer Growth* (Downer's Grove: InterVarsity Press, 2001), 70–73. His unscientific study puts the amount of transfer growth at somewhere between 50% and 90%.

²⁸ David T. Olson, *The American Church in Crisis* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishers, 2008), 58, 132–133.

²⁹ David T. Olson, *The American Church in Crisis* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishers, 2008), 36ff.

³⁰ Actually, the trends toward church plateau and decline are not limited to the Western world. Aging and drifting churches are prone to introversion and can be found in all parts of the world.

³¹ David T. Olson, *The American Church in Crisis* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishers, 2008), 83–87.

³² Stanley J. Grenz, *A Primer on Postmodernism* (Grand Rapids, William B. Eerdmann's Publishing Company, 1996), 2.

restricts reality to the observable (naturalism), believes humankind is the crowning achievement of the universe (humanism), that knowledge is essentially good and attainable (the scientific method), that advancement is inevitable (progress), that knowledge is objective (certainty), that things happen as a result of fixed causes (determinism), and that each person determines their own truth (antiauthoritarianism).³³

In assessing these modern assumptions, many Christians will agree with postmodernists regarding the arrogance, the triumphalism, and inadequacy of such beliefs to serve the needs of an increasingly globalized and interconnected world reeling from the excesses of modernist philosophy. Though the church has too often adopted these values unto itself, closer inspection will reveal an incompatibility with biblical teaching.

However, postmodernism, without Christ, is also bankrupt. Postmodernism's denial of the objectivity of knowledge, the belief that knowledge cannot be known with certainty, the rejection of the meta-narrative (the overarching explanation of history and mankind's place in it), the denial of the inherent goodness of knowledge, the rejection of progress, the superiority of community-based knowledge, and the disbelief in objective inquiry runs afoul of biblical truth in a number of ways.³⁴

In fact, both philosophical systems are corrupted without the light of the Gospel. Both fall short of recognizing the desperate state of the human condition, though postmodernism more quickly admits human limitations. Both fail to recognize the need for the Savior.

Even so, the evangelical subculture is much more deeply entrenched in the worldview of modernity, a system against which it has traditionally fought. Now it looks with deep skepticism towards post-modernity, and in many ways, it rightfully should. But to reach the next generations with the Gospel, evangelicals must be willing to admit their own failings to be true to their biblical foundations. Such confessions will serve to build credibility among those to whom the church is called to witness.

This great challenge of presenting the Gospel as good news to the postmodern mind also represents a great opportunity for the church. Honest engagement with these pertinent issues will do much to advance the cause of Christ in an increasingly post-Christian context. However, if this opportunity is ignored, the

³³ Millard J. Erickson, *Postmodernizing the Faith: Evangelical Responses to the Challenge of Postmodernism* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1998), 16–17.

³⁴ Millard J. Erickson, *Postmodernizing the Faith: Evangelical Responses to the Challenge of Postmodernism* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1998), 18–19.

church's evangelistic effectiveness will diminish as the Good News becomes unintelligible or irrelevant to an increasingly large portion of the population.

the challenge of church growth where there is no church³⁵

Since the earliest days when Peter Wagner and Win Arn first introduced the North American church to the missiological principles being articulated by Donald McGavran, the Church Growth movement in the U.S. has primarily focused on reaching the lost located in close geographic proximity to the local church. In most cases those who were added to the church looked much like the people already attending. Indeed this very fact was at the heart of McGavran's understanding of the "homogeneous unit principle" which stated that in coming to Christ people prefer not to cross racial, cultural, or linguistic barriers.

In like manner, most foreign mission agencies in the early days of the Church Growth movement focused much of their attention on extension growth as mother churches planted daughter churches among their own kind of people in the region in which they were located.

A pivotal shift in thinking took place following Ralph Winter's presentation at the 1974 Lausanne Conference entitled "The Highest Priority: Cross-Cultural Evangelism" in which he made the case for focusing missional resources on reaching the lost in regions where there were no churches from which to plant more churches. Building on McGavran's insights into the importance of people movements, Winter's seminal talk helped the church recognize the need for crossing barriers that separated whole people groups where churches were present, from those "unreached" peoples where the church was not. The frontier missiology³⁶ that emerged was grounded in a strong ecclesiology that insisted that the Great Commission could only be fulfilled by establishing viable, indigenous, evangelizing church movements in every people group on earth.

This historical, theological, and missiological linkage between the Church Growth movement and the Unreached Peoples movement—"Church growth where there is no church"—remains a challenge to be explored. Pastors and leaders who think globally for the twenty-first century must explore not only "connectivity" with new global expressions of church, but also bold and innovative "engagement" with unreached peoples among whom that missiological

³⁵ This wording was actually the title of a series of seminars presented in the early 1980's by frontier missiologist, Dr. Len Bartlotti, at the International Church Growth Conference, Oslo, Norway, sponsored by the Yoido Full Gospel Church (South Korea). Special thanks goes to Dr. Bartlotti for his assistance with this article.

³⁶ For an overview of the critical issues and trends in frontier missiology over the last twenty five years, see the "International Journal for Frontier Missiology," available online at: <http://www.ijfm.org/>.

breakthrough (church) has yet to take hold. According to Todd Johnson, approximately one-third of the world's population are in "World A"—unevangelized non-Christians living in "unreached" peoples, peoples without an indigenous church movement. Some peoples are not only unreached, they are "unengaged," that is, no church or agency has even begun outreach among them. For example, at the time of this writing there are at least 210 unreached Muslim peoples of over 100,000 in population who remain "unengaged." In a day where technology and air travel are shrinking distances, and Christians and churches are eager to be "involved" globally, churches must discover new ways to deploy resources to people groups that have been overlooked, neglected, or considered unreachable. At a time when an estimated 91% of all Christian outreach/evangelism does not target non-Christians but focuses on already "Christianized" countries,³⁷ this frontier challenge to "preach the gospel where Christ is not known" is both biblical and eschatologically urgent (Rom 15:20–21; Mt 24:14).

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For North American churches these groups are considered to be geographically and culturally remote, and this is most often the case. However, the changing ministry landscape in North America and Europe reveals groups among whom there are few to no churches but which are geographically close. For example, Tony Carnes with the Values Research Institute reports that the regions of Manhattan, Staten Island, Northern New Jersey, Rockland County, and Fairfield County in the New York City area are believed to be one of the least evangelized places in the United States where less than 0.5% of the population is evangelical.³⁸ While many strong, evangelical churches are located in New York, for the most part they are ineffective in reaching portions of the city.

"People blindness"³⁹ may occur with hidden population segments in the U.S. as it does in other parts of the world. In a controversial example, the XXX Church targets consumers and those in the pornography industry.⁴⁰ Advertising itself as the "#1 Christian porn site," it seeks to extend the Gospel into a world, geographically close yet considered unreachable.⁴¹

³⁷ David B. Barrett and Todd M. Johnson, *World Christian Trends A.D. 30–A. D. 2200: Interpreting the Annual Christian Megacensus*, (Pasadena, CA: William Carey Library), 3.

³⁸ E-mail correspondence with Beverly Cook, Concerts of Prayer Greater New York on 1 September, 2009.

³⁹ Defined by Peter Wagner as "the malady that prevents us from seeing important cultural differences that exist between groups of people living in geographical proximity to one another—differences that create barriers to the acceptance of our message" in C. Peter Wagner, *The Healthy Church* (Ventura, CA: Regal Books, 1996) 5.

⁴⁰ Craig Gross, "the porn pastor," and one of the founders of the XXX church regularly debates Ron Jeremy, a porn star, in universities around the country. One such debate aired on ABC's Nightline in 2008 becoming Nightline's most watched segment in its online history. From: ABC Nightline, available at <http://www.abcnews.go.com/Nightline/FaceOff/> (accessed on 25 August, 2009).

⁴¹ The ministry has received both strong support (Bill Hybels and others) as well as strong criticism from some who say the ministry is going too far.

Luis Bush pioneered a campaign to target the “4/14 Window” focusing attention on reaching children between the ages of 4 and 14 with the Gospel.⁴² Most research indicates this demographic frame to be a time of high receptivity. Like the “10/40 Window” the goal of the 4/14 Window is to focus attention on reaching the least reached peoples.

In research Biola students have conducted in the Los Angeles area, it is clear that even in areas where many churches abound, there are still significant groups of people who have little to no exposure to a meaningful Gospel message. Their admittedly limited study of the Thai population in southern California revealed only one known church composed primarily of Thai Buddhist background believers. No doubt, this story is repeated over and over again in cities across the country.

These examples demonstrate how “unengaged people” may be residing in close proximity to existing U.S. churches, but because of our inability to “see” them or because of our lack of confidence in our ability to reach them, they are forgotten. This is not to say, however, that these unengaged people on our doorstep are of equal urgency to reaching the areas of the world where there are literally no churches in a whole region, linguistic, or cultural group. Where geographical or cultural distances are greater, and the separation of the unchurched and the church is more extreme, urgency is increased as the likelihood of finding the truth “by happenstance” is diminished.

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The connections between peoples “near” and “far” underline the need for greater synergy between the Church Growth movement and frontier missiologists and practitioners. There are significant “lessons learned” that can be exchanged, as breakthroughs in the Middle East or Southeast Asia have significant implications for work among diaspora or immigrant populations elsewhere, and visa versa.⁴³

This challenge of growing the church where there is no church must remain a high priority for local churches that wish to be obedient to the Great Commission. Thankfully, the opportunities for effective engagement with these, the most needy peoples, are greater than ever.

conclusion

Whether the term “church growth,” “church health,” “effective evangelism,” or some other term is used, the priority, centrality, and urgency for winning men and

⁴² Source: Christianity Today Online available at <http://www.christianitytoday.com/ct/2004/july/37.53.html> (accessed on 25 August, 2009).

⁴³ For a discussion of recent research on trends and practices bearing fruit in the Muslim world, see J. Dudley Woodberry's (ed.), *From Seed to Fruit: Global Trends, Fruitful Practices, and Emerging Issues among Muslims* (Pasadena: William Carey Library, 2008).

women to Jesus Christ must remain a chief concern as the church witnesses holistically to the world of God's love. Fads and fashions come and go, running their lifecycle of public awareness, rising and falling in their ability to focus attention and mobilize a following. Labels change and with every new name and paradigm introduced, something is gained and something is lost in the exchange.

This article seeks to frame the priorities and direction of this new journal while not limiting its scope. Following on the success of its predecessor, the *Journal for the American Society for Church Growth*, the *Great Commission Research Journal*, as it is now called, is focused on contributing to our growing understanding of how the church worldwide is engaging the Great Commission with the goal of increasing our effectiveness of service.

The six challenges highlighted here each represent an obstacle to be overcome and an occasion of high potential that can allow the church to move ahead with its mission.⁴⁴ Yet mere identification of the issues is just the beginning. Each of these challenges raise a host of questions. What new theological issues need to be addressed given the trends we are observing? What presuppositions and assumptions need to be revisited? How do these new global realities shift our understanding of what the church is and what it is called to do? What are the points of high leverage as we seek to respond with limited resources to new needs and concerns? What new models of engagement work and what are their weaknesses? To each of these questions more will be added as thoughtful minds wrestle with the rapidly changing context of ministry. Together let us consider next steps and call the church to effective response as stewards of the resources God has given us.

⁴⁴ This author would argue that the first challenge of reinvention is only valuable as it serves to direct attention to the challenges that follow.